

Forgetting Africa



WRITERS ON READING

Sean Badal
on travelling minds

PICKED up a copy of Wilfred Thesiger's *The Marsh Arabs* at a bookshop winter sale recently. It's Thesiger's seminal account of the Ma'dan, the marsh Arabs who inhabited the Tigris-Euphrates marshlands of Iraq. It was a serendipitous purchase, as the joy of book-buying usually is.

Thesiger had been on my mind recently. I had just finished reading *South of the Barbary*, by Justin Marozzi. It's an account of a particularly gruelling trip through the Sahara. In it, the author mentions going to meet Thesiger to get some advice on desert travel. Thesiger was by then into his 90s and living in shabby gentility in a retirement home in Surrey. It was a poignant moment in the book, about the beginnings and endings of journeys.

I've always loved travel writing. The only writer I have ever written fan mail to was William Dalrymple. I'd begged his home address off a girlfriend who was working at the Spectator — Dalrymple was a regular contributor — and fired a missive telling him how much I loved *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium*. He wrote back, enclosing a set of photographs of ancient Christian monasteries that he'd taken on his trip. That summer, I woke up early one morning and took the train to Oxford to catch Dalrymple speak at the university.

By the time he took the stage in one of the hallowed halls, the literary festivities were in full swing. The febrile atmosphere was the product of the forced gaiety that only an English summer can induce — here, if it's summer and the sun is shimmering, you have to get pissed and lark about. The shrill voices echoing across the courtyard gave me an instant headache. Dalrymple took the stage in flip-flops, Bermuda shorts and a floppy T-shirt that barely constrained his paunchy belly. On the podium was a plastic tumbler of (presumably warm) beer.

I didn't stay long. Dalrymple still is, of course, in my pantheon of cherished travel writers. The others are a mixed bag of old favourites — Jonathan Raban, Colin Thubron, Pico Iyer, Tim Mackintosh-Smith, Jason Elliot and Paul Theroux. The great dichotomy of these writers is that, despite the grand, sweeping narratives of foreign landscapes and foreign peoples, there is always the sense of the familiar, as though one were having a conversation with a troop of highly intelligent, well-travelled, but slightly doty, aunts and uncles.

● Sean Badal is the author of *Dead Sanctities* and *Seeds of Disorder*. His new book, *The Fall of the Black-eyed Night* is published by Umuzi.



PODCAST: To hear the interview go to www.timesurlat/5f0a73

Bongani Madondo has mixed feelings about Clive James's A-Z of thinkers. He loves it, but something is missing



OBJECTION: Critic Clive James neglects African intellectuals and artists

and watched over the last 40 years.

I say parts of the narrative of this mental cinema, Camus wants to be Humphrey Bogart, and James wants to be Camus. You also see such iconic names as Louis Armstrong, Coco Chanel, Charlie Chaplin, Duke Cocteau, Miles Davis, Jean Ellington, Federico Fellini, Norman Mailer, Michael Mann, Thomas Mann and that man called Mao shooting the breeze. A collection of over a 100 profile-essays and critiques as well as miniature biographies of the leading literary, political, cultural personalities straddling the 19th and 20th centuries, figures who've influenced and impelled James, this book is testament to the power of the art of persuasion as opposed to the populist tyranny of the kind that's in the offing if the likes of Blade Nzimande, Zwelzima Vavi and Julius Malema get to inaugurate their man, J.Z.

Never sly, never sneaky, never falsely modest, you're just too aware reading James that you're in the company of an extraordinary mind. As a stylist, James is as elastic as Mark Twain; as a gossip, a bantamweight compared to Evelyn Waugh, but just as lyrically bitchy.

That culture is, of course, Western. The book's heroes are almost all white, Western, mostly male, which is sad and ironic, considering that James, like Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell and his contemporary, VS Naipaul, is one of the most well-travelled authors you'll find this side of National Geographic.

Reading *Cultural Amnesia* feels like watching a period flick — black-and-white and grainy. On the screen you see the beguiling Russian poet Anna Akhmatova being complimented for her turn of phrase as much as for the way she turns on her heels, as she looks into her

flatterer's eyes, which happen to be those of Albert Camus.

In the narrative of this mental cinema, Camus wants to be Humphrey Bogart, and James wants to be Camus.

You also see such iconic names as Louis Armstrong, Coco Chanel, Charlie Chaplin, Duke Cocteau, Miles Davis, Jean Ellington, Federico Fellini, Norman Mailer, Michael Mann, Thomas Mann and that man called Mao shooting the breeze. A collection of over a 100 profile-essays and critiques as well as miniature biographies of the leading literary, political, cultural personalities straddling the 19th and 20th centuries, figures who've influenced and impelled James, this book is testament to the power of the art of persuasion as opposed to the populist tyranny of the kind that's in the offing if the likes of Blade Nzimande, Zwelzima Vavi and Julius Malema get to inaugurate their man, J.Z.

The only black names are those he believes validate his elitist view

Or let's just assume that the thrill is gone, baby — that both contentments are not worth the effort it takes to cut down precious trees and, besides, why waste the ink? Or let's just say: Clive James doesn't give a f**k about Africa. Regardless of what we opt for, this, dear, is part of my depression, and as shrink talk goes: depression can reveal truths about us that our cleverness can't even hide. ● *Cultural Amnesia: Notes in the Margins of My Time* is published by Picador Books, R204

SUNDAY TIMES TOP 10

FICTION

- 1 *Ena Murray Omnibus 18* by Ena Murray, Jasmyn, R150
- 2 *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, Bloomsbury, R13995
- 3 *This Charming Man* by Marian Keyes, Michael Joseph, R180
- 4 *The Shack* by William P Young, Windblown, R120
- 5 *Plague Ship* by Clive Cussler, Michael Joseph, R150
- 6 *Spud* by John van de Ruit, Penguin, R100
- 7 *Change of Heart* by Jodi Picoult, Hodder & Stoughton, R200
- 8 *Silent Partner* by Jonathan Kellerman, Headline, R13995
- 9 *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, Bloomsbury, R13995
- 10 *Spud: The Madness Continues* by John van de Ruit, Penguin, R100

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GIVEAWAY

Sunday Times Lifestyle and Random House are giving five readers a chance to win a copy of *Cheesecutters and Gymnasts*. To enter, simply tell us: What are the names of John van de Ruit's bestselling books about boarding school?

Send your answers to Sunday Times Lifestyle/Random House Competition, PO Box 1742, Saxonwold, 2132. Competition closes on August 18.

NON-FICTION

- 1 *A New Earth* by Eckhart Tolle, Penguin, R180
- 2 *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, Bloomsbury, R14995
- 3 *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne, Simon & Schuster, R19995
- 4 *In a Different Time: The Inside Story of the Delmas Four* by Peter Harris, Umuzi, R185
- 5 *The Last Lecture* by Randy Pausch, Hodder & Stoughton, R184
- 6 *A-Z van Openbaring* by J du Rand, Curr, R15995
- 7 *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* by Robert T Kiyosaki, Warner, R8995
- 8 *Don't Panic* by Alan Knott-Craig, Penguin, R50
- 9 *Screw It, Let's Do It* by Richard Branson, Virgin, R51
- 10 *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* by Robin S Sharma, Element, R15995

Picture: AFPRA